Ludic Narrative Structure and Character Formation in *Susanna Clare's Piranesi*

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Abstract

The article examines *Piranesi* by *Susanna Clarke* using digital humanities, which considers the mechanics of the gameplay and flow of the characters in the piece. The article positions *Piranesi* as a story incorporating the exploratory gameplay features to shape the development of the characters by spatial traversing, learning new game rules, expanding memory, and uncovering the story bit by bit. The main character documents his findings of the House, but those who explore the game world do not get explicit data but rather find out its hidden mechanisms. The paper uses digital humanities, based on the narrative theory and ludic studies and shows that *Piranesi* builds characters by performing repetitive actions as they face constraints and discovery. Diary entries are one of the storytelling devices used in the novel, which makes the narrative work well, but restricts the reader's knowledge since the story is presented in the game-like format of character growth over the years. The game narrative of *Piranesi* functions on another system than game storytelling, whereby the players are more concerned with ethical behaviour rather than dominance and control. The system of the game does not allow the players to employ extractive or goal-oriented gameplay techniques. In addition, the paper shows that Piranesi incorporates the literary storytelling technique by using game-based systems to illustrate that modern literature is not exempt from using its digital components to draw upon experimental structural constructs. It supplements digital humanities scholarship by indicating that a method of analysing data through games can indicate the character development in modern English literature in a manner that goes beyond a superficial game-like interpretation. *Piranesi* exposes a human presence of competitive play in the manner in which it portrays knowledge acquisition as one of the things that takes place during physical exploration rather than by means of competition domination.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Game Studies, Ludic narratives, Identity, Exploratory Space.

Introduction

The structural and formal experimentation used in contemporary English literature tends more toward the logic of the digital media and interactive systems. The narrative form that is no longer stuck to the linear plot development but already follows procedural, spatial and system-oriented design principles is noticed by scholars of digital humanities (Hayles, 2012; Murray, 1997). An example of this change can be found in *Piranesi*, written by Susanna Clarke, in which the author builds a story that candidates to play with exploratory mechanics, instead of traditional causality.

Instead of developing plot-wise, Piranesi is presented in spatial exploration, in place of repetitive interaction and delayed access to epistemological knowledge- all elements that were traditionally found in exploratory digital games (Aarseth, 1997). This follow-through of the novel is reliant not on the revelation via dialogue or exposition, but rather on continued exposure to an environment whose rules one simply has to study via experience. This goes in line with ludic narrative forms where an interpretation is seen through performance, as opposed to representation (Juul, 2005).

The thesis of this paper is that Piranesi uses the game mechanics as a narrative system to influence the character growth, moral focus as well as the involvement of readers. The journal entries made by the protagonist serve the same purpose as in-game logs and describe the findings without explaining the role. Players, just as the readers, have to deduce narrative rules based on repetitions and observations, as opposed to being told (Ryan, 2001).

Using a digital humanities model that values ludic studies and narrative theory, this paper tries to illustrate how Piranesi builds character in terms of action in repetitive cycles, space learning and moral restraint. This way, the novel proposes an alternative to prevailing extractive and competitive ways of gameplay, which is more humane, making ethical attentiveness the key form of progression (Bogost, 2010).

Literature Review

Available literary criticism of Piranesi largely tries to place the novel in the context of metaphysical fiction, mythic allegory, and unreliable narration. The House is often analysed by critics as a symbolic labyrinth; the numerous scraps of the diary are often analysed as an expression of epistemic instability and memory lapses. These kinds of readings are based on the existing narrative theory, which prefigures the focalisation and a narrow amount of knowledge as a literary tool (Genette, 1980).

Simultaneously, the research in digital humanities has expanded to further investigate the subject of the absorption of computational logic and interactive aesthetics by literary texts. According to scholars, procedural thinking, modularity, and system-based meaning-making are frequently represented in modern stories even in print (Hayles, 2012; Murray, 1997). Ludic studies also lead to this insight by showing that games create narrative by way of rules and repetition and player engagement as opposed to the use of linear storytelling (Aarseth, 1997; Juul, 2005).

But the majority of literary criticism that appeals to games is only metaphorical, the elements of a game being treated not as systemic but as stylistic. Although a few critics find the strange structure of *Piranese* unusual, there is paucity of studies that used game mechanics as the methodology that can be used to understand the course of character development and the storyline. As a result, the procedural design of the novel has not been sufficiently theorised in literary criticism and game studies.

Research Gap

Even with the growth of digital humanities methodologies, a striking lack of sustained ludic criticism of the English novels that exist currently is still apparent. The body of scholarship on Piranesi has failed to analyze the ways in which its narrative logic correlates with the exploratory gameplay of the spatial discovery, rule learning, and progression through performance.

In addition to that, research on game studies tends to focus on digital artefacts, bypassing literary writing in which game systems are practised without computational interfaces (Aarseth, 2012). This disciplinary rift creates the gap beyond which novels such as Piranesi are seen as innovative, but not entirely analysed by the systems within which they simply perform.

Through this gap, this paper will argue that Piranesi is a coherent ludic system within the literary form by illustrating it through the broadening of the digital humanities and narrative theory.

Theoretical Framework

The article brings together three schools of thought, which are Narrative theory, Digital Humanities, and Ludic Studies. The narrative theory analyzes the application of temporal limitations and focalisation by a writer as described by Genette, based on the authority the author vests in the flow and path of telling the story. Digital humanities relate to various disciplines via its examination of the ways computational practices change cultural content, which exists outside of digital space. The concept of Ludic breaks the existing knowledge and examines the game systems, player control and approaches to interpreting the content of rules. The game allows its players to create characters and meaning through its procedural narrative system, which allows players to engage with game components in a limited manner rather than a standard narrative structure.

Methodology

In the paper, the interpretive approach of the qualitative method will be used. Piranesi is a novel that is discussed in terms of constraints, rules and feedback as a system. Its analysis is performed in three steps. To begin with, there is the analysis of spatial development and interaction with the environment in the form of an exploratory game (Ryan, 2001). Second, the character development is studied in terms of results of repeated action and memory inscription instead of psychological depth only (Juul, 2005). Third, the diary is understood to be seen as a procedural interface that governs access to narrative and restricts the epistemic authority (Hayles, 2012).

In this manner, the research can consider Piranesi not a figurative game but a literary artefact that is arranged according to ludic principles.

Analysis

Narrative Engine: Spatial Exploration

Piranesi by *Susanna Clarke* is a drastic shift in the development of narrative because the space location is considered the most important arena of action where meaning, memories and identity are created. The house is not something that simply happens, but is a place of action, subject to rules, a place which must be acted upon, walked over and over again so that narrative knowledge can be projected. This is quite comparable to the ergodic literature genre by Espen Aarseth (1997), in which non-trivial efforts are used in order to jump through the text. In Piranesi, there is no effort being made via a bifurcating choice or participative identity, but via cognitive mapping and space sensitivity. The reader, as the protagonist, comes to know the House by bits, hallways, vestibules, and statues and creates a sense of coherence by the repetition and observation.

The House is an elaborate navigable system consisting of halls implementing internal logics: flooded lower areas controlled by tides, upper ones consisting of clouds and birds, and middle ones controlled by human-sized statues of human size. The plot progression is not by building up conflict but rather by augmenting spatial acquaintance. Every time we get back to a hall, there is a subtle shift in the perception of the reader, and it is not the space, but the viewer that is transformed. This resembles the exploration mechanics of digital games in which development and improvement in environmental literacy is frequently regarded as a milestone in progression instead of a linear plot advancement (Aarseth, 1997). The process of being conscious of the location of oneself, of what laws are in power there, becomes narratively interesting.

This physical centre diffuses traditional plot lines. It does not have any obvious inciting incident or climactic resolution, but rather the House itself drives it forward in its narrative. According to the theory of spatial narrative, conveyed by Marie-Laure Ryan (2001), space is able to arrange the elements of a story, structuring the potential actions and meanings. The House dictates what should be known, remembered and treasured in Piranesi. Space then takes up the responsibilities of an agent of narration, which affects both epistemology and ethics. The attraction of the reader resembles the experience of a gamer in a persistent world, whose intellect is gained by being there and taking time rather than making a revelation.

System Discovery and Rule Learning

The most apparent of the ludic qualities of Piranesi is its lack of authoritative exposition. The novel does not provide explanations concerning the origin of the House, its metaphysical rules, or even who the main character. Instead, the readers must rely on the calculation of the governing system on their own observation. This design possesses a game-play history that emphasises exploration over teaching, and, as a result, playing games and rules being learned through experimentation instead of being taught (Juul, 2005). Pirandello hears about the water levels due to the high and low water, he learns about the seasonality through the travelling birds, and finally, he solves the danger by noticing the definite halls which are not to be visited during a flood.

This process of system discovery turns knowledge into an earned one as opposed to a given one. A reader is not allowed to possess an omniscient narrator to clarify what remains unclear; all that emerges is based on the limited but upright view of Piranesi. This form of engagement involves a procedural form of engagement on the part of the reader in compiling a set of rules according to pattern and exceptions. This goes in line with the argument by Jesper Juul (2005) that games derive any meaning in the conflict between rules and interpretation by players. In Piranesi, the rules of the House are fixed, but they are reinterpreted progressively as a new set of contextual information is revealed.

The lack of a clear explanation also pledged support to epistemic humility. Piranesi does not wish to conquer the system by dominating it, instead he lives in harmony with the system and adjusts his behaviour to the rhythm of the system. This is unlike most stories in which knowledge can be used as a means of control. In this case, knowledge does not give authority in the conventional meaning, but helps us to survive and live ethically. The reader, like a prisoner, is obliged to an incomplete knowledge of a given state of affairs.

Ludic Interface: Diary Entries

The diary format of the novel is a ludic interface similar to in-game journals, quest logs, or save files. Every entry captures actions, observations, and findings without a significant degree of interpretive orientation. This is an externalisation of memory which has the narrative and mechanical purposes. Interfaces brokered access to information as well as mediated cognition, as described by N. Katherine Hayles (2012). The diary by Piranesi not only mediates the access of the reader to events, but also the continuity and sense of identity of Piranesi herself.

The diary has severe epistemic limitations. The entries are dated, localized and restricted to what Piranesi could have known at the time the writing takes place. It has no retroactive correction and omniscient narration. This causes a time overlay effect like gameplay logs, except that the old actions are not reprocessed until an unlocked piece of information reveals them. The reader has a sense of discovery asynchronously, seeing patterns or contradictions earlier than Piranesi does, with the same playwright noticing system affordances before quite grasping their consequences.

In addition, the format of the diary also predicts process rather than outcome. What is important is not, as such, what Piranesi comes across but how he documents it, what he decides to note down, to classify and appreciate. The careful labelling of statues, tides, and skeletons is the same completionist urge promoted in most exploration-based games, but without any kind of rewards or accomplishments. Documentation even becomes significant as a phenomenon that promotes focus, caring and persistence as narrative dynamics that are highlighted in the novel.

Health and Safety of Non-Extractive Play

In comparison with most stories that tend to structure development in the form of conquest, extraction, or domination, *Piranesi* incorporates ethical restrictions within its systemic logic. Care, coexistence and reverence are the principles that dictate interactions of Piranesi with the House. He only catches the requisite fish, attends to the bones of the dead, and considers statues as people and not things. These are not moral teachings passed on to a child, or rather imposed on the system; they are in-built rules that ensure that he survives.

This moral tendency falls into the concept of procedural rhetoric created and developed by Ian Bogost (2010) in his discussion, where values are produced by a mechanism that consists of rules, in contrast to the concretisation of argument. It does not only the House that rewards attentiveness and respect, but transgressive behaviour (which the Other is usually associated with), is dangerous and brings fragmentation. It is not mastery that helps to achieve progress, but rather the permanence of ethics. Piranesi has no interest in acquiring resources of the House or unearthing its secrets to his personal benefit; he just wants to live correctly and well in this House.

This non-extractive play is a challenge to the dominant paradigms of narrative as well as game design. It suggests another paradigm in which interaction is maintained through caring and not controversy. Putting the reader as a participant-observer, he or she is encouraged to appreciate patience, humility, and relational ethics. This echoes the discussions in game studies that are just beginning to appear that discuss slow play, ecological awareness, and posthuman ethics, where systems promote coexistence and not control.

Repetition Development of Character

Piranesi lacks a narrative character growth based on a clash or an epiphany. Rather, development has arisen via ritualised repetition and continuity in ethical enactment. Piranesi has been living through his quotidian activity of taking tides, divination, and tending dead people instead of being told by his own introspection. It can be seen as performance-based progression models in game studies in which identity is defined by repetitive action in a system of rules (Juul, 2005).

The role that repetition plays is stabilising and generative. Although the routines of Piranesi are seen to be static at first, they do add sense, though at the expense of a changed context. The memory accumulation is a kind of progression system, which extends the agency, but does not allow domination. As Piranesi finds out more about his past, his behaviour takes on a different meaning, but his moral values are the same. This continuity is what the novel wants to emphasise: that identity is not determined by origin or mastery but through extended relational practices.

Notably, narration is also opposed by repetition. And there is no completion of it to wear out or to go beyond the system. The House is enormous, and not all halls have been explored, even when the revelations are taking place. This loose-ended

Ness reflects the sandbox game pattern, in which the game continues even after the story is resolved. It cannot be considered that the meaning is created in open interactions or definitive answers, and leaves the reader with a feeling of continuation.

Conclusion

Piranesi demonstrates that contemporary writing can assimilate the game mechanics into the narrative texture without making the literary text complex or simplified. Through space exploration, rule finding, diary telling interfaces and ethical constraint, the novel explores the world of imagining a new system of play, reconfiguring characterisation and reader investment.

This paper has shown that game-like content by Piranesi is much more than a game-like effect and serves as a narrative based on procedures. The book introduces a situation where there are possibilities of humane forms of play, and it optimistically presents some aspects of a human-based approach towards playopia.

With the ongoing process of literary studies trying to approach the digital culture, Piranesi remains one of the best examples of the opportunities of analysis through a game to deepen the perception of narrative, morality, and characters in modern English literature.

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Informed Consent

The authors declare that informed consent was not required as there were no human participants involved.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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